The Mediating Role of e-counselling Skills on the Relationship between e-counselling Ethics and Limitations to Counselling Self-efficacy among e-Counsellors in Malaysia

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Abstract: Counselling skills and accountability towards ethical counselling conduct are important characteristics of highly confident and competent counsellors. For the counselling field to remain relevant in the fast-changing world, counsellors must demonstrate high resiliency and adaptability to the current demand and challenges in counselling tasks, including e-counselling. This study aimed to identify e-counselling skills as mediators between e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations with counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors in Malaysia. One hundred and fifty-nine e-counsellors from various Malaysian government and private institutions were recruited to participate in the study. A back-to-back translation technique was employed to adapt the Counselling Self-Estimate Inventory (COSE) and identify e-counsellors' self-efficacy in the Malaysian context. E-counselling skills, ethics and limitations were measured using self-developed questionnaires for data collection purposes. E-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics, e-counselling limitations, and counselling self-efficacy were all found to be significantly correlated, as predicted by the structural equation model analysis. The findings confirmed the researchers' assumptions that e-counselling skills play an important role as a mediator between e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors. The model achieved the goodness of fit indices. The Board of Counsellors Malaysia, counselling program providers, and counsellors at all levels, including trainees, supervisors, and professional counsellors, can benefit from the current findings.

Keywords: E-counsellors, E-counselling Skills, E-counselling Ethics, E-counselling Limitation, Counselling Self-efficacy

1.   Introduction

A new form of counselling called e-counselling utilises social networking services and instant messaging applications as communications tools to assist individuals in resolving life and relationship problems (Wong et al., 2018). It must be a positive and healing approach for people who are socially anxious and who might otherwise avoid face-to-face therapy for fear of being judged or stigmatised (Lange et al., 2003) or who are uneasy and wary about engaging in face-to-face therapy (Barnett, 2005). Furthermore, in a post-pandemic period, students who struggle to cope with distance learning will benefit from accessible counselling services (Celine & Wong, 2022). As such, e-counselling has grown to be highly relevant for individuals seeking professional help for a range of concerns. It can be offered in various modalities, with the three primary modalities being e-mail, chatroom, and teleconference (Awang, 2007; Haryati, 2020; Zaida Nor, 2006). The process of e-counselling through e-mail requires the client to contact the counsellor via an email address provided on the website; the counsellor typically has greater flexibility in terms of responding (Nor Ba'yah & Yahaya, 2001; Foon et al. 2020)

In chatrooms, the interaction between clients and counsellors can occur simultaneously with agreements for both parties to arrange their meetings through instant messaging. To receive online counselling, one must first locate a suitable counsellor by visiting the website or that of a counselling service organisation. Next, one must schedule an appointment, pay any applicable fees, and then participate in the online counselling session itself within the chat room made available (Nor Ba'yah & Yahaya, 2001; Zaida Nor, 2006). Meanwhile, teleconferencing is conducted by using additional tools like web cameras that enable counsellors and clients to meet face-to-face and reduce the limitation of e-counselling (Grohol, 2003). Counselling modality requires counsellors to possess knowledge and suitable skills to deliver counselling online competently, and these become major challenges for them (Alleman, 2002; Graff & Hecker, 2010). These challenges explain why e-counsellors are so hesitant to include e-counselling in their work (O'Dea et al., 2017; Glasheen et al., 2017).

It is an extremely valuable quality for counsellors to be able to engage in counselling tasks that are novel and challenging, particularly given the hazardous nature of the counselling profession (Rorlinda et al., 2017). The achievement of effective counselling requires counsellors to improve their counselling competency and receive additional training in e-counselling (Holmes & Kozlowski, 2016; Nur Jannah et al., 2020). In past studies, the acquisition of counselling skills is linked to counselling self-efficacy (Crowe et al., 2022). To resolve social issues within a community, counsellors must use ethics within a professional helping relationship occuring in a secure and private setting (Liley & Norsuraya, 2018). Research from previous studies indicates ethical questions surrounding the use of technology in counselling (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2018). When counsellors fail to acknowledge the impact of these limitations on the effectiveness of counselling services, they may be discouraged from using e-counselling as a primary medium for counselling (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019). Malaysian counsellors consider e-counselling a revolutionary skill and technology in the counselling field. Hence, this study aimed to identify an e-counselling skill underlying the relationship between e-counselling ethics and the limitations related to counselling self-efficacy.

2.   Literature Review

This study identified the link between e-counselling ethics and limitations with counselling self-efficacy, and how e-counselling skills mediated this relationship. Each variable is discussed in length as follows:

2.1   E-counselling

In keeping with the digital age, e-counselling has grown in importance and is now a viable alternative to face-to-face counselling for people seeking professional help (Nurul Fitriah et al., 2022). The term "e-counseling" refers to utilising technology to facilitate a one-on-one interaction between therapists and clients who are physically separated by time and space (Lau et al., 2013). It refers to distant communications systems, for instance, the telephone, asynchronous e-mail, real-time chats, and video calls. These are used to provide mental and behavioural health services such as counselling, consultation, and psych education to clients outside of a traditional face-to-face clinic environment

(Mallen et al., 2011). They are also methods for improving one's mental or behavioural health through constant, two-way, text-based interactions between a client and a mental health professional (Alleman, 2002). It uses distance technology, an attractive and alternative method (Wong et al., 2018) for communication between counsellors and clients at different locations without the need to meet. It is also known as email therapy, e-therapy, computer mediated communication (CMC), internet-based therapy, cyber-counselling, cyber therapy, online or internet therapy, web counselling and cyber counselling (Tannous, 2017; Zaida Nor & Yusni, 2018).

2.2 E-counselling Skills

E-counselling relies on a wide range of skills, but one of the most important is the ability to identify problems, create goals, and devise a plan of action to address those problems (Hawke, 2017). It is important for e-counselors to remember that the online environment presents unique challenges, and they will need to develop new sets of abilities to succeed in this new setting. Counsellors should develop competence in e-counselling through training in the areas of technology, theory, applications, and ethics (Fenichel et al., 2002), licencing laws (Maheu, 2003) and online data security (Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019). Micro-counselling skills such as asking open and closed questions, building rapport, paraphrasing, and summarising clients' emotions, beliefs and values are largely applied in online counselling (Hawke, 2017). As the authors suggested, counsellors will benefit as these skills will allow them to effectively communicate and achieve counselling goals via the Internet and text-based methods like e-mail and chat. This is supported by Mallen et al. (2005), who stated that training in communication and new technologies could help counsellors interpret text messages and assess their clients without excessive dependence.

2.3 E-counselling Ethics

It is important to follow the rules of ethics and the law when engaging in e-counselling so that no one is harmed (Lau et al., 2013). This includes confidentiality (Nathynie et al., 2020; Mallen et al., 2005), where online communication may get misdirected by typos and are sent or received by unknown people (Recupero & Rainey, 2005), adequate experience of culture to avoid language barrier with the clients (Fenichel et al., 2002), boundary issues to prevent misunderstandings about the counsellor-client relationship (Bailey et al., 2002). Counsellors must have competence in the selected practice mode and be well-trained enough to prevent professional misconduct, have a duty to warn and protect the clients who might present a danger to themselves or others (Mallen et al., 2005), and have a duty to obtain informed consent and credentials. A subsection in the Counsellor Code of Ethics by the Board of Counsellors Malaysia (2016) addresses the ethical obligations and guidelines that counsellors must comply with when using technology-assisted counselling services. The American Counseling Association's (ACA) (2014) Counsellor Code of Ethics contains a section specifically to using technology, social media, and distance counselling in e-counselling.

2.4 E-counselling Limitations

Previous research has determined that e-counselling cannot replace traditional counselling due to the challenges of establishing strong therapeutic alliances in the absence of non-verbal messages and details (Zainah et al., 2010; Schuster et al., 2018). According to Amos et al. (2020), there are certain drawbacks to e-counselling, including the loss of non-verbal cues, misunderstanding due to the absence of physical interaction, and lack of concentration between the client and counsellor due to poor internet connection. The absence of non-verbal cues during e-counselling causes the counsellor to lose contact with the client, resulting in communication that is more challenging and less easily understood (Haberstroh et al., 2007) and a loss of genuine and empathic elements (Beidoğlu et al., 2015). Barriers in online language can become an obstacle to practising e-counselling (Haberstroh, 2010; Harrad & Banks, 2016) due to the use of text-based informal communication, which lacks supportive and empathic tones and may cause misinterpretation. Counsellors have also raised concerns about their lack of confidence in technological skills and competencies (Steele et al., 2014; Fang et al., 2017; Foon et

al., 2020), as it is difficult for them to remain updated with technical knowledge regarding learning the latest software, operating procedures, and managing tasks (Fang et al., 2017).

2.5   Counselling Self-efficacy

Larson and Daniels (1998) describe counselling self-efficacy as the belief and evaluation of one's competence to conduct effective counselling sessions. A person's confidence in their competence to counsel a client successfully is necessary for good therapeutic practice (Schiele et al., 2014). Confidence has the potential to influence the effectiveness of school counsellors' work (Iannelli, 2000), the quality and delivery of effective practise among school mental health therapists (Schiele, 2013), and the generation of appropriate assessment and therapy for students with mental health issues in schools (Schiele et al., 2014). It strengthens school counsellor's dedication and outcomes while exhibiting competent counselling skills in action (Rorlinda et al., 2018) and encourages positive behaviours and healthy interpersonal interactions (Nur Jannah et al., 2020). Counsellors with high levels of self-efficacy belief have lower anxiety levels (Mehr et al., 2014), can avoid the risk of burnout (Gunduz, 2012), maintain their psychological well-being, and are always ready and confident to perform the assigned tasks (Nur Jannah et al., 2020). In addition, the mastery experience demonstrates the strongest correlation with counselling self-efficacy belief (Pei Boon et al., 2017). It is considered the most effective source of information retention and development (Wan Marzuki et al., 2009; Zelenak, 2015).

Similarly, Lent et al. (1991) found that personal performance achievement and success are the most powerful and important sources of self-efficacy among psychology students. A study by Tang et al. (2004) also indicated that an individual's previous work experience is related to their counselling self-efficacy. Counsellors' confidence in their abilities will rise in response to favourable feedback from superiors, peers, coworkers, school officials, parents, and students, while it will fall in response to negative feedback (Hutchison et al., 2006). This demonstrates that a person's previous learning experience may serve as a foundation for confidence and mastery experience (Jensen, 2012) since social acceptability and support are substantially correlated with self-efficacy (Booker, 2007). Additionally, recent research suggests that counselling skill development is linked with improvement in counselling self-efficacy (Kozan, 2020). Adeyemo and Agokei (2019) reported that counselling self-efficacy contributes to improvement in skills related to emotional intelligence. In other words, counsellors with higher self-efficacy are likely to be emotionally aware and competent at coping with emotional difficulties. Thus, a counsellor's competency and self-efficacy both play crucial roles in boosting the effectiveness of their work as a professional.

2.6   Theoretical Framework

Bandura's (1977) Self-efficacy Theory (SET) was applied in this study. The theory describes individuals' expectations of certain skills and capability to take the desired course of action while overcoming present obstacles. It is a degree of one's own belief in their ability to execute challenging tasks (Bandura, 1977). Individuals with high efficacy expectations or positive judgments of their capacity to handle intimidating or risky situations are more likely to participate in the chosen activities. The SET maintains that personal efficacy belief or self-efficacy is an outcome expectancy that strongly influences one's actions and motivations to participate in a particular activity. It becomes a major influencing factor in self-efficacy, especially if one possesses the appropriate skills, knowledge, and competency to execute the associated tasks. Larson and Daniels (1998) suggested that when Bandura's (1977) definition of self-efficacy is applied in counselling, counsellors' self-efficacy can be defined as their confidence in conducting counselling-related activities such as individual and group sessions and counselling-related programmes. More specifically, counselling self-efficacy represents counsellors' beliefs or expectations of their capabilities to conduct counselling activities with clients (Larson & Daniels, 1998). Therefore, this study uses the SET to explain the concept of counselling self-efficacy among e-counsellors and its contributing factors, including perceptions of skills, ethical practices, and limitations in e-counselling.

3.   Research Objective and Hypothesis

In view of the discussion above, the main objective of this study is to identify the mediating effects of e-counselling skills on the relationship between e-counselling limitations and e-counselling ethics with counselling self-efficacy. Thus, the authors hypothesised that:

i. H_{a1}: There is a significant correlation between e-counselling skills and counselling self-efficacy.
ii. H_{a2}: There is a significant correlation between e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy.
iii. H_{a3}: There is a significant correlation between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy.
iv. H_{a4}: There is a mediating effect of e-counselling skills on the relationship between e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy.
v. H_{a5}: There is a mediating effect of e-counselling skills on the relationship between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy.

4.   Methodology

This quantitative study was conducted to examine the associated variables. The design, sampling technique and instrument used are discussed in this section.

4.1   Research Design

In this study, 159 e-counsellors in Malaysia participated in a quantitative analysis of descriptive, correlation and mediating effects based on the Structural Equation Model (SEM). Correlational analysis was employed to explore the relationship between e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics, e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy. Analyses of direct and indirect effects were utilised to examine the mediation influence of e-counselling skills on the association between e-counselling limitations and e-counselling ethics, and counselling self-efficacy.

4.2   Population and Sample

This study's target population consisted of e-counsellors in any private and public institutions in Malaysia who offer e-counselling. Researchers collected data for this study using an online form containing a research questionnaire distributed to randomly selected e-counsellors in Malaysia. Google Forms was used to collect data. Users could access the completed surveys that are automatically stored in the Google database using this form. The simple random sampling method was used to choose potential respondents from a total of 799 e-counsellors who were found as of June 2020. The researchers allocated each respondent a number from 1 to 799, which were selected at random until 200 numbers were chosen. Following the completion of data cleansing, 159 responses were utilised.

4.3   Validity of Research Instrument

The components of the instrument used in this study are discussed as follows, along with the validation process:

4.3.1   E-counselling Skills, Ethics and Limitations Questionnaire

Existing scales were not found to be culturally appropriate to measure e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations among e-counsellors in Malaysia. These questionnaires were developed for data collection through an extensive literature review process. Creswell's (2014) rigorous item development procedures were utilised for survey development purposes. Five stages were involved during the validation process: item development, item translation, expert validation and a series of pilot testing. The result of this process revealed good content and construct validity. The final

item count for all questionnaires was 34, 30 and 18 items, respectively, for e-counselling skills, e-counselling ethics and e-counselling limitations questionnaires.

A Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) was employed for the questionnaires. A higher score in the e-counselling skills questionnaire indicates that the respondents can apply various counselling skills (e.g., demonstrating empathy, exploration, and multicultural skills) in e-counselling sessions. The e-counselling ethics questionnaire assessed the perceived ability of e-counsellors to apply counselling ethical practices (e.g., informing clients of the benefit and limitations of e-counselling and adhering to counselling laws) in e-counselling. Finally, the e-counselling limitations questionnaire concludes with higher scores for e-counsellors who perceive more limitations in e-counselling. According to the pilot study results (N=33), the e-counselling skill questionnaire scored a Cronbach alpha of.97, the e-counselling limitation questionnaire scored a Cronbach alpha of.88, and the e-counselling ethics questionnaire scored a Cronbach alpha of.98. Due to these results, the e-counselling group research instrument was deemed reliable.

4.3.2   Counselling self-estimate inventory (COSE)

Larson et al.'s (1992) Counselling Self-Estimate Inventory (COSE) was employed, as permitted by the original researchers. Harkness's (2003) Translation, Review, Adjudication, Pre-testing, and Documentation (TRAPD) method in the European Social Survey (ESS, 2018) was applied to achieve the validity of the inventory for both English and Bahasa Melayu versions. The scale contains 37 items and assesses counsellors' self-efficacy in various aspects, such as micro-skills, the counselling process, and cultural competence. The scale ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with high scores indicating a higher level of counselling self-efficacy. The COSE coefficient alpha value of .92 (N=33) indicated a high degree of reliability from the pilot study.

4.4   Data Analysis Procedure

All data collected for this study were analysed via Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) using version 25.0 of the AMOS programme. The analysis process involved Structural Model Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) as a first layer and testing direct and indirect mediating effects. Both the measurement and structural models compensate for the Structural Equation Model (SEM). Prior to assessing the fit and mediation effects, the measurement model was estimated (Hair et al., 2010). The CFA method determined whether the data sample could validate the suggested model and vice versa.

The structural modal was identified as the first step before testing the mediating effects test. The results showed that the model achieved the fitness indices. Thus, the mediating test can be evaluated. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was utilised to analyse the direct relationships between each variable involved.

5.   Results

Based on the hypothesis made, these findings are reported:

5.1   Results of Hypothesis Testing for Direct Relationships

As hypothesised, the analysis of SEM supported that there is a significant relationship between all the variables tested (Figure 1). E-counselling limitations demonstrated a negative relationship between e-counselling skills (p=.000, β=- 0.171) and counselling self-efficacy (p=.000, β=-.601). The rest of the variables showed a positive relationship with each other. This means counselling self-efficacy improves as e-counsellors' skills and ethical practices increase and their perception of the e-counselling limitations decreases.
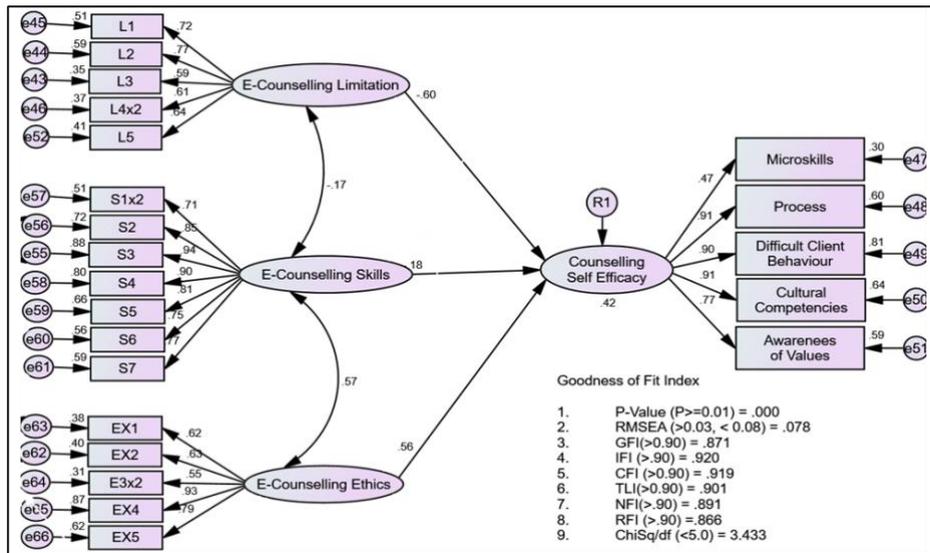
Fig. 1 Model of relationship between e-counselling skills, ethics, limitations and counselling self-efficacy

5.2 Results of Mediating Effects of E-counselling Skills

Results of SEM analysis revealed a significant direct effect of a relationship between e-counselling limitations with counselling self-efficacy (p=.000, β=-233) and between e-counselling limitations with e-counselling skills (p=.000, β=-231). E-counselling skills positively and directly correlated with counselling self-efficacy (p=.000, β=0.221) and e-counselling ethics (p=.000, β=0.664). Finally, e-counselling ethics revealed a direct relationship with counselling self-efficacy (p=.000, β=0.250) (Figure 2).
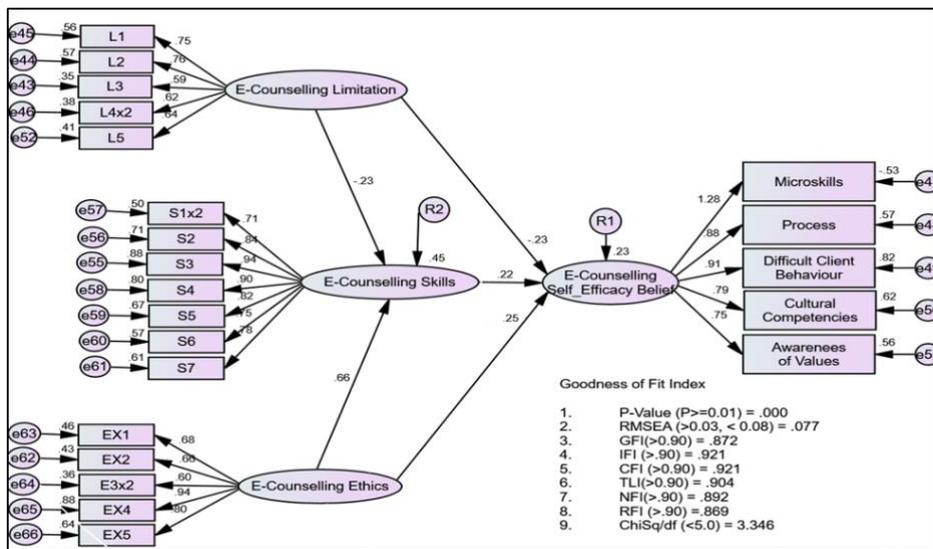

Fig. 2 Structural model of e-counselling skills as a mediator between e-counselling limitations and ethics toward counselling self-efficacy

Table 1 revealed the indirect effect or the effect of e-counselling skills as a mediator for the relationship between e-counselling limitations and ethics with counselling self-efficacy.

Table 1. Summary of the hypotheses testing related to mediating effects

Path	Standardized Estimate Direct Effect		Indirect Effect	Conclusion
	On Mediator	On CSE		
L→S→ CSE	.160***	.401***	.146***	Partial Mediation
E→S→ CSE	.781***	.910***	.709***	No Mediation

Note: ECL: e-counselling limitations, ECS: e-counselling skills, CSE: counselling self-efficacy belief
*** p < 0.001

The beta value for the direct effect of e-counselling limitations (L) on counselling self-efficacy (CSE) is .401 (L→CSE, p<0.000), while the beta value with e-counselling skills as the mediator is .146 (L→ S → CSE, p<0.000). Both the direct and indirect effects are significant. Thus, e-counselling skills partially mediate the predictive relationship between e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy. This finding supported the second hypothesis as formulated by the authors. The results further showed no significant direct relationship between counselling ethics (E) and counselling self-efficacy (CSE) (E→CSE, β=0.561, p>0.000) and a significant indirect relationship (E→S→CSE, β=0.709, p<0.000). Hence, the third hypothesis could not be supported, indicating that e-counselling skills did not mediate the relationship between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy among the respondents.

6. Discussion

The current study determined the role of e-counselling skills in mediating the relationship between e-counselling limitations, e-counselling ethics, and counselling self-efficacy. All variables were found to be connected by both the correlation and SEM analyses. This means that raising one's grasp of the limitations of e-counselling, increasing one's application of skills related to e-counselling, and growing one's knowledge of e-counselling ethics will have a more significant tendency to raise one's counselling self-efficacy. This provides a new theoretical explanation for Bandura's self-efficacy theory, especially on its applicability in Malaysia's e-counselling knowledge and field. E-counselling limitation is always a point for e-counsellor avoiding e-counselling. This is because the lack of non-verbal cues makes the counselling session more challenging and might lead to misinterpretation (Bakar et al., 2020).

This paper demonstrates that e-counselling limitation awareness is enhanced when the counsellor has greater counselling self-efficacy and skills. Developing effective counselling skills and behaviours is closely linked to counsellor self-efficacy (Adeyemo & Agokei, 2019). Therefore, counsellors with high levels of counselling self-efficacy can confidently use their knowledge and skills, helping them overcome any difficulties they may encounter. Counsellors' understanding of some aspects of online treatment may be solidified and enhanced with more experience in giving online counselling sessions. This will strengthen their grasp of online counselling best practices, and they may find previously hard constraints more bearable. E-counsellors with inadequate training in online intervention may struggle to maintain positive attitudes and self-assurance while carrying out their work. Counsellors should be well-versed in and up-to-date on the environment of Internet communication in order to avoid misinterpretation (Harrad & Bank, 2016; Fang et al., 2017).

Ethical practices are often an issue in e-counselling, such as confidentiality, privacy, boundaries and counsellor competence (Stoll et al., 2020). This study's results show that e-counselling ethics is related to e-counselling skills and counselling self-efficacy. Individuals who believe in their own abilities to succeed will also be more capable of ethical quality, as stated by Gaa (2014). Counsellors who believe in themselves are more likely to put in the effort necessary to improve their skill during their training, which may lead to greater moral reasoning and conceptual growth (Peace, 1995; Cashwell & Dooley, 2001). Counselling students who receive self-efficacy training during their practicum show improvements in both their clinical skills and their ability to successfully reason ethically, according to research by Halverson et al. (2006). Moral reasoning is the tool of choice for counsellors facing an

ethical issue (Levitt et al., 2015). Those who are equipped with an excellent aptitude for moral thinking will be more ethical in their counselling practice. Barnes (2004) and Cinotti and Springer (2016) argue that counsellors with a strong sense of self-efficacy are more likely to take responsibility for and initiate their own professional activities and obligations. Consequently, counsellors will comply with the laws and ethics requirements imposed by the board of counsellors. Therefore, this lends credence to the hypothesis that counselling self-efficacy, e-counselling skill, and e-counselling ethics are related.

E-counselling empirical research has largely focused on testing counselling skills. Counselling skills serve as a measure of expertise in counselling sessions (Sawyer et al., 2013). The ineffectiveness of a therapy session might be attributed to a lack of actual counselling skills being used throughout the session (Adigwe & Okoro, 2016). Developing trust between client and counsellor is key to the counselling process. Given that there is a positive correlation between e-counselling skills and counselling self-efficacy, it is essential for counsellors to have a firm understanding of the fundamentals of counselling skills. The current study supports past studies that showed a significant improvement in counsellor trainees' self-efficacy after completing a counselling skills course (Akçabozan-Kayabol et al., 2021; Crowe et al., 2022). Increasing counsellors' knowledge and ability to apply counselling skills can reduce anxiety and previous bias or judgement towards counselling services. Therefore, a higher ability to perform e-counselling skills leads to higher resilience and confidence levels to engage in counselling activities. This parallels with previous research by Urbani et al. (2002) and corroborates the conclusion that a rise in counselling skills contributes to the development of counsellor self-efficacy, as a counsellor familiar with his or her abilities is likely to feel competent while using them. Moreover, counsellors' problem-solving and decision-making abilities benefit from self-efficacy, making it one of the most essential traits in the profession (Easton et al., 2008). As Smith and Gillon (2021) pointed out, online counselling allows counsellors to learn new techniques and enhance their old ones. By adapting their counselling techniques to the virtual space, e-counsellors can reach out to those needing emotional help despite physical distance. E-counsellors develop self-belief and confidence if they can apply and adapt counselling skills in an e-counselling environment, especially if the session succeeds.

The mediating effect of counselling skills is partial mediation on the relationship between e-counselling limitation and counselling self-efficacy, but not mediating effect on the relationship between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy. The mediating effect of e-counselling skills is only on the first relationship; it means that the correlations will change with the involvement of e-counselling skills. Counselling skills are closely associated with both counselling limitation and counselling self-efficacy, while no empirical studies have specifically addressed the mediation influence of e-counselling skills on e-counselling limitations. Counselling skills help guide the counselling process, client development and transformation (ErlinaYaumas et al., 2018).

According to the data, an individual's confidence in their own counselling capabilities rises in line with their level of knowledge and practice (Urbani et al., 2001; Greason & Cashwell, 2009). Arguably, the lack of current training at university or college levels to incorporate courses related to e-counselling skills suggests that counsellors are not fully prepared to conduct e-counselling as effectively as they do in face-to-face counselling (Mercadal & Cabre, 2022). The lack of knowledge and exposure to e-counselling provision during counselling training affects counsellors' self-efficacy when providing e-counselling. With e-counselling becoming an integral part of help-seeking services in the Malaysian community, e-counsellors need to be more knowledgeable, resourceful, and skillful in integrating ICT into their counselling work. Hence, skills-based training in e-counselling is necessary during counselling training and education (Johnson & Rehfuss, 2020; Nagarajan & Yuvaraj, 2019). According to APA (2013), a growing number of psychologists use telecommunication technologies to deliver psychological services to clients. These psychologists should receive appropriate professional training in order to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to provide these services. With sufficient training, e-counsellors know how to overcome problems in e-counselling that are not present in face-to-face counselling (e.g., loss of verbal cues), enhancing their self-efficacy to deliver e-counselling in the future. The confidence of counsellors in applying what they have learnt is crucial to the success of the counselling process (Adeyemo & Agokei, 2019).

Failure to conduct ethical counselling can harm clients, which can later deteriorate e-counsellors' self-efficacy. The current study revealed that e-counselling ethics does not directly affect counselling self-efficacy, which the authors assume is due to the lack of enforcement of counselling laws in Malaysia. Furthermore, these findings may have been influenced by a lack of knowledge and

experience with e-counselling. In Malaysia, e-counselling is still a relatively new practice, and the current ethical policy is not updated at par with counselling standards such as those of the American Counselling Association (ACA). With respect to counselling law, the Counsellor Act 1998 (Act 580) stresses that counsellors need to register with the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) and meet training requirements to offer counselling services to clients. Thus, violations of the counselling law can subject counsellors to legal action. However, this was not properly enforced in Malaysia (Liley & Norsuraya, 2018), which undermines the credibility of qualified counsellors.

Furthermore, despite having completed a counselling ethics course during their training period, counsellors may struggle to solve ethical complications due to a lack of knowledge on ethical counselling issues (Liley & Norsuraya, 2018). Insufficient knowledge and exposure to ethical issues related to e-counselling through formal education negatively impact counsellors' efficacy in navigating the e-counselling realm. The current counselling codes regarding e-counselling delivery in Malaysia may not be relevant to safeguard and equip e-counsellors with skills necessary to provide ethical counselling practice, so it comes as no surprise that e-counselling skills was shown to not mediate the relationship between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy. This contradicts Neerushah et al. 's (2021) report on how multicultural competence skills contributed to the development of counselling self-efficacy in addressing ethical perplexities. Thus, at the higher institution level, it is important that counselling educators motivate and engage students in e-counselling components. Counselling programme providers must revise the counselling curriculum to prepare counsellors for the shift in counselling delivery. However, any changes in the curriculum will only be possible and meaningful if the Board of Counsellors (Malaysia) takes initiatives to update the ethical counselling codes, which can pave the way for counselling training providers to adopt and meet the growing demand for e-counsellors.

7.   Conclusion

This research determined the mediating effect of e-counselling skills on the association between e-counselling limitations, ethics, and counselling self-efficacy. The results indicate that e-counselling skill partially mediates the association between e-counselling limitation and counselling self-efficacy. This means that the involvement of e-counselling skills positively affects the relationship between e-counselling limitations and counselling self-efficacy. Additionally, it was found that there is a significant relationship between e-counselling ethics with counselling self-efficacy and e-counselling skills. However, when acting as a mediating effect, e-counselling skills does not affect the link between e-counselling ethics and counselling self-efficacy. These findings suggest the importance of counselling education and training to meet the demand for e-counselling services in Malaysia. The current shift in counselling delivery has made e-counselling equally crucial as face-to-face counselling; thus, it is pertinent that counsellors, both professionals and trainees, receive more skills-based training and exposure to the practice of e-counselling. Updated ethical codes that fully encompass e-counselling components are addressed, which can make way for counselling programme providers to develop e-counselling-relevant coursework or curriculums at higher institutions.

8.   Suggestion for Future Research

Empirical findings from this study show the role of e-counselling skills as a mediator of the links between e-counselling limitations, e-counselling ethics, and counselling self-efficacy among Malaysian e-counsellors. E-counsellors in Malaysia who have worked as online therapists participated in this research. Different groups of counsellors may be studied in similar ways in future studies. This may be useful for contrasting traditional counsellors' skills, limits, ethics, and self-efficacy with those of online therapists.

In addition, future studies may look at how different delivery methods compare with one another. E-counsellors can use this to see whether there are any differences in the skill sets needed, the constraints imposed by ethics, or the means by which they can improve their counselling self-efficacy depending on the delivery medium. E-counsellors' sociocultural context may impact their sense of competence as a counsellor; this is a topic for further research. Especially in Malaysia, there is a dearth of research connecting the socio-background characteristics of e-counsellors with their levels of self-

efficacy. Therefore, an empirical study exploring the impact of e-counsellors' cultural and social background on their self-efficacy could be conducted to further investigate its significance and consequences for counselling practice and training.

9. Co-Author Contribution

The authors affirmed that there is no conflict of interest in this article. Author 1 designed the research protocol and supervised the overall research and writing. Author 2 made improvements to the literature review and interpretation of the results and completed the final revision of the overall writeup. Author 3 performed the initial literature review and improved revisions to the research methodology and data analysis. Author 4 reviewed the literature review and the interpretation of the results. Finally, Author 5 and 6 confirmed and approved the final draft of the paper.

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